

The 7th Annual Southeastern Lesbian and Gay Conference was held March 19-21 in Tampa, FL. Over 300 attended from cities all over the Southeastern U.S.

The Bay Area Rights Council hosted the conclave. It chose the unicorn as its symbol. The existence of gays has been debated and denied throughout the centuries. Just as the unicorn legend has survived, so have gays despite years of discrimination and oppression. Real issues and problems were dealt with in an attempt to reach a definition of individuals and a community.

"Be Unique" was the theme celebrating survival and uniqueness as healthy, full functioning members of society. It was extolled that much could be given to a culture being created and defined daily. T-shirts were offered depicting the unicorn symbol and "Be Unique" theme.

Vito Russo spoke on Friday evening. Russo has worked for the film department of New York's Museum of Modern Art and Cinema 5 Releasing Ltd. She has written numerous articles on film and lectured on the college circuit. Gays in motion pictures have been historically depicted in Russo's The Celluloid Closet. On this theme, Russo noted high points in a subjective history of gays and lesbians on the screen.

Russo's approach was chronological and thematic. Films have often portrayed ideals of sexuality contrasting masculinity and femininity. Pointed examples were the "buddy films" of the 30s and 40s.

Russo pinpointed modern day failures. A poignant case was 1975s "The Choirboys." Persons previewing the film walked out citing anti-gay language.

Russo stated that recent pictures such as "Making Love" and "Personal Best" should be supported. Further improvements in gay portrayals are long overdue. "Invisibility is the greatest enemy," according to Russo. It is well that gays be seen and portrayed realistically. Russo added criticism of directors who "get on board, and pull up the ladder." This



super-safe approach stunts creativity and dampens advances in situational and character portrayal."

Melvin Boozer did undergraduate work at Dartmouth. He is proceeding as a doctoral student in sociology at Yale. Boozer has served in the Peace Corps in Brazil and taught for three years at the University of Maryland. He has served as President of the Gay Activists Alliance in Washington, D.C., his hometown. He was nominated for Vice President at the 1980 Democratic Convention being the first gay person of record so nominated. Boozer currently serves as the National Gay Task Force's (NGTF) Director of Civil Rights Advocacy.

Boozer offered an analysis of the "Limits of One Issue Politics." He decried the crisis in morality in the sense that gays are being abused. The Moral Majority is "dangerous because of something we've not entirely faced up to."

Boozer noted that the NGTF was sought out for the first time in opposing Philadelphia's Rev. B. Samuel Hart's nomination to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. There was a coalition with the NAACP, Urban League, Latin American groups and the ACLU. These were groups that had touched the NGTF in a "very gingerly way" in the past. It was made explicitly clear in this convergence that they opposed Hart's anti-gay stance. "We don't want that kind of person on the Civil Rights Commission. He's not our kind of person."

Similar screening will be done in reference to judicial appointments. "If Mr. Hart and Mr. Thomas of the EEOC are examples of the kind of people that are going to be nominated as judges, then someone had better be watching when those nominations are made."

A minority status is the "best status a 'liberal' society has to offer," Boozer said. "Is that what we want or is that all we want?" Minority, here, "is a relatively powerless group which is, in some way, distinguishable from another group and on the basis of that distinction that group is discriminated against."

Boozer hit one issue politics as a danger to those who "aren't willing to be involved" rationalizing that "its not my problem." There is only one group of people (not being said in an accusatory sense but because its a fact) in the "gay community, so-called, who if the stigma of being gay were removed would immediately join the mainstream and that is if you're white, male and upper-middle income. If you're anybody else, you've still got a problem." In a movement that purports to represent all gay people to act in a way that could benefit only a part of that community is to do a disservice to that community.

"Before we are able to develop successful coalitions with other groups, it is going to have to become obvious to other groups that we care about more than just one thing." He expressed concern over local gay political movements that have some measure of success, unfortunately they've become involved in a narrow range of issues. Thus, they aren't taken seriously. There is no real community if some gay people don't feel at home in a place called gay. In order to be a community, we have to have moral boundaries. "We have to say certain things are right; certain things are wrong." "If discrimination is wrong, and we believe that, we have to say it, we have to intervene. Discrimination is wrong, its always wrong, it can never be justified." We too often allow people who hate us tell us that we have no right to claim symbols of legitimacy. We should never have allowed the far right to claim the American flag...nor the Bible."

Boozer recounted an incident after the recent Air Florida crash. One person was known to be gay. "He was in a relationship with a lover. At the funeral, the family refused to let him see the body. He was not allowed to participate in the suit against the airline company. He was not allowed in any way to express his grief over that loss. Two days ago, he committed suicide. (There were expressions of sorrow from the audience.) These things still happen to us...a part of the reality we live in. Boozer called for taking responsibility for ourselves. "We have the same emotions, the same human feelings."



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A strong moral imperative means coming out on other issues beside the gay one. "That is a level of coming out we haven't reached yet." He recalled Vito Russo..."You still don't see black actors taking roles which aren't stereotyped as black. You still don't see black politicians talk about many things beside civil rights." To be labeled as a minority is an excuse to get around allowing a minority to make an impact.

In concluding, Boozer used three references to the Bible. He noted Esther's story. She had a unique responsibility and a unique position. A moment or a number of moments come in our life when "if we don't do something someone is going to suffer. We have to take the risk to do that to help the person." Jesus' exorcism (the rise up and walk story...Matthew 9:1-8, Luke 5:17-26 and Mark 2:1-12) was next. The point here is to take responsibility for your life. Looking for someone else to save you is not the answer. John's nightmare on Babylon (Come out from among her people lest you share in her sin and partake in her plagues...Revelation 18) was used to show that we must not only "demand to be tolerated but, we have to affirm our uniqueness. We shouldn't be anxious to conform to the mainstream. The more we conform, the more we oppress groups at our periphery." (Spontaneous applause broke out.) If we can't protect the First Amendment rights of controversial groups, "why did they write it?" "The gay community will succeed only if it is able to come out in the collective sense of taking responsibility for itself and individually for people to take responsibility for other people. Respect is not based upon understanding." The moral majority cannot accept life's mysteries. "Human personality is inherently respectable whether you are gay or straight, man or woman."

Sheila Ortiz Taylor professes Eighteenth Century English Literature, Creative Writing and Women's Studies at The Florida State University in Tallahassee. She received a doctorate from UCLA.

She read and commented on portions of her novel Faultline Saturday afternoon. Faultline is an outrageous, zesty and funny lesbian novel with a

variety of characters taking the world in its stride. Taylor made crucial points in noting "social change happens by how children are raised. Heterosexuals who say we can't raise children are challenging the most basic things." These segments of heterosexual society are among the most repressive, according to Taylor. She noted in a chapter on "Beef Wellington" that "people turn to pornography when they can't long see the magic in reality." In the chapter "All Things Being Equal" participants were asked to see themselves as a six foot, four inch black man. The passage had this high point for reflection: "Black people tend towards paranoia, gays feel the same, thus I will be in double jeopardy."

R Robin Tyler delighted the largest audience of the conference Saturday night. A native to Canada, she joked that going to Minneapolis was "going south." She completed work at the Manitoba Theatre Center. Altho a playwright and a director before 18, she went on to the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. She is a highly rated class stand-up comedian bearing wit and satire on numerous road shows.

R Tyler offered biting political satire on President Reagan. Examples: "His son is a faggot, who are they trying to kid." She likened Ron and Nancy as a "geriatric Ken and Barbie." Alexander Haig, Secretary of State, shared in the humor binge. His vision of a limited nuclear war likened to "you can kill everybody once." (Tyler mused that you'll never hear this material on Carson. The audience gave ringing laughter.)

R At intervals, however, Tyler was deadly serious. Her views are that she has no affinities for cities, states or nations. They divide people "arbitrarily." She praised the rise of women's music selling at times over a million copies with no overground play. She called for an end of self-righteousness in the name of "political correctness." She ripped the "do it my way, so I'll respect you" attitude. (Loud applause broke out.) At her peak, she offered a message that when adverse things "come down that affect us, we have to fight for survival. We've been victimized thru religion (sin) and

psychology (sick). Tyler cried to a raucous approval that there should be no worry about a failure to be understood. "Don't worry about being nice; we have to stop wanting acceptance."

A wide variety of workshops totalling more than forty were offered. Examples included: Born-Again and Gay--Building Support in the Bible Belt by David Chewning of Evangelical Outreach in Atlanta. Pat Jones of Memphis told of gay radio and tv programs. (Conference speakers were taped to be broadcast on Memphis cable tv.) David Dupree and Fred Butner offered prospects for organizing for economic power. They're from the Key West Business Guild. T.R. Witomski of Orlando told of Alcohol and Drug Abuse in the Gay Community. The goal: how to prevent it and how to combat it and help those in trouble. Attorney Anthony M. Livoti of Fort Lauderdale offered advice on legal rights. Ollie Lee Taylor shared observations on local politics. (He ran an unsuccessful race for Tallahassee's City Commission.) He also outlined the functions and needs Gay Peer Volunteers tries to meet. (GPV is an FSU-based peer help unit.)

Two notable attributes came from two of the workshops. Melvin Boozer offered a session on the linking up of national and local gay organizations. Follow-up on this will be made as Boozer tours other communities and groups. An upcoming crucial pair of meetings will be the coming National Activist Union of Gays and Lesbians (NAUGL) conference in the Nation's Capital on the 9-11 July. It will also sponsor a separate international conference there. Boozer saw a consensus to: facilitate communication, for the NGTF to serve as a clearinghouse and maintain a neutral stance among organizations, examine the prospects of a national forum of local leaders and help promote fundraising and public service announcements in communities. New Orleans' Joey Ramano's consciousness raising session on racism led to a fervor to make a statement to the conference. After making the point that racism has deeply infiltrated the lives and psyches of both the oppressed

and non-oppressed, the session defined racism as the belief that races have distinctive characteristics and manifesting that by prejudicial behavior favorably or unfavorably expressing negative personal actions. A draft by Ollie Lee Taylor based on a portion of Boozer's Saturday address was agreed to and brought to the conference's plenary session.

"The Southeastern Lesbian and Gay Conference deplores discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion or sexual orientation. This includes any function or event offered within a public milieu. We hope each person here and each organization represented here will be conscious of discrimination and will be moved to act in opposition to such practices within the lesbian/gay community and in society as a whole."

The statement was approved with no debate and without a single dissent.

Films were available with gay themes. Four offerings of note: "Greetings from Washington, D.C."...this new release documents the October 14, 1979 National March on Washington. "Teenage Homosexuality" was a segment from CBS's Thirty Minutes. In it, some Houston teens share their lives and experiences. "Who Happen to Be Gay" looks at the lives of three men and three women and tries to tell how they came to terms with their sexual orientation. "Boys Beware" was an example of how homosexuality used to be documented - a very stereotyped view from the 50's.

Another outstanding aspect of the conference were the vendors. Gay oriented enterprises offered books, pamphlets and souvenirs. Memphis, Atlanta, Tallahasee and Nashville were represented. Sheila Ortiz Taylor and Vito Russo made themselves available for conversation and to sign copies of their books during receptions. These vendors were appreciated since many of these items were often difficult to get in many localities.

John Grannan, Conference Coordinator, expressed joy in the good spirits

and unity. There was no ideological rancor present that threatened previous conferences. (Dissension hurt the 1978 Atlanta conference, and some angered, left. Memphis' 1980 was held in a tense atmosphere of picketing and demonstrations by Fundamentalist churches and their supporters.) A diabolical "Trask Can" was passed around to help the financially beleaguered Florida Task Force. It was filled with contributions which helped whittle a \$3,000 deficit. (Trask is a Florida State Senator who was co-sponsor of the ill-fated Trask-Bush proviso.) The conference itself will breakeven or have a small surplus according to Grannan. This would be a first. It was agreed without dissent that the eighth conference would be held in Atlanta. Exact dates to be decided; in the spring of 1983.

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